

The Concept of *Nobilis Barbarus* in the Light of Contemporary Ecological Challenges

Koncepcja *Nobilis Barbarus* w świetle współczesnych wyzwań ekologicznych

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Abstract

The concept of the noble savage present in Western culture expresses the belief in the nobility of human nature which impels man to lead life in harmony with nature, oneself and other people. The article distinguishes and examines four different ways in which this concept is approached. These are: classical approach, naturalistic approach, Arcadian approach, and ecological approach. The study makes an assessment of the concept of the noble savage, and demonstrates that it is incompatible with contemporary state of research on human nature and with man's activity in the world. The assessment focuses on the ecological approach to the concept of the noble savage (the so-called ecological Indian), which entered mass culture and shapes false beliefs about man's capabilities in relation to nature.

Key words: noble savage, *nobilis barbarus*, ecological Indian, pristine myth, ecological crisis

Streszczenie

Obecna w kulturze zachodniej koncepcja szlachetnego dzikusa wyraża przekonanie o szlachetności natury człowieka, która uzdalnia go do prowadzenia życia w harmonii z przyrodą oraz w zgodzie z samym sobą i drugim człowiekiem. Artykuł niniejszy wyróżnia i charakteryzuje cztery ujęcia tej koncepcji: ujęcie klasyczne, ujęcie naturalistyczne, ujęcie arkadyjskie i ujęcie ekologiczne. Opracowanie to dokonuje oceny koncepcji szlachetnego dzikusa, wskazując na jej niezgodność ze współczesnym stanem badań na temat natury człowieka i stylu jego aktywności w świecie. Ocena ta koncentruje się na ekologicznym ujęciu koncepcji szlachetnego dzikusa (tzw. ekologicznego Indianina), która weszła do kultury masowej i kształtuje nieprawdziwe przekonania na temat uzdolnień człowieka w odniesieniu do przyrody.

Słowa kluczowe: szlachetny dzikus, *nobilis barbarus*, ekologiczny Indianin, mit dziewiczej przyrody, kryzys ekologiczny

Introduction

The concept of *nobilis barbarus* (the noble savage) has been present in culture for millennia. It expresses the belief in the nobility of human nature which impels man to lead life in harmony with nature, with oneself and other people. In the Euro-Atlantic culture, this concept is often presented in opposition to the concept of the civilized man who is believed to be alienated from the natural environment, and thus

unable to form harmonious relationships with nature and other people.

Although the very concept of the *noble savage* was first used in this sense only in modern times, it is possible to distinguish four basic ways in which it is viewed in Western culture. These are: 1) classical approach; 2) naturalistic approach; 3) Arcadian approach, and 4) ecological approach. There are many indications that all these approaches are incompatible with the contemporary state of research into the

nature of man. In the ongoing debate on this subject, many scholars believe that the concept of the noble savage is just another myth that has no foundation in real life. In view of the fact that the concept has gained prominence and is applied in developing conservation strategies in many Third World countries, it seems necessary to assess how truthful and reliable it is. After all, the rich European tradition shows that implementing even most noble ideas which are based on a false anthropology brings about even more serious problems instead of solving them.

***Nobilis barbarus* in the classical approach**

In European literature, Homer was the first to make a clear distinction between savage tribes and the Greeks who were a civilized people. When describing the beginnings of European civilization in *The Iliad*, he mentioned names of some Greek heroes who had defeated representatives of the most savage peoples – a tribe of centaurs (Homerus, 1974). In ancient thought, human savagery was contrasted with the Greek civilization. Two opposing views on the evolution of civilization clashed in this thought. The first one was a myth about four ages of mankind attributed to Hesiodus. According to it, the earliest period of human history referred to as the Golden Age represented the highest level of cultural development. It was characterized by carefree happiness. Man did not have to work, did not suffer, he lived in a world where there was no violence, the earth provided food in abundance, the climate was mild, and people who did not grow old spent their time enjoying themselves (Hesiodus, 1978; Ovid, 1998). As time went by and man entered the Silver Age, and then the Bronze and the Iron Age, his morals were gradually degrading and the level of existence declined. The other belief which was in opposition to the concept of cultural regression was that of a gradual progress of culture over time. This belief was well illustrated by Plato in *Protagoras*, where the progress of Greek civilization was explained with the gods' interference. According to Plato, the gift of law and a sense of shame, that were given to man by gods, were the prerequisites for building social and political order necessary to create *polis*, where Hellenic civilisation developed (Plato, 2008, Plato 1998). The idea that development of culture is a process of continuous improvement was also widespread in Roman thought (Lucretius, 1975).

Hellenic culture from the very beginning stressed the widespread savagery of peoples neighbouring Greece who were described as barbarians. The Greek literature, however, also pointed to the existence of uncivilized tribes that were characterized by innate nobility and gentleness. Homer was one of the first to write about them in his *Iliad*, when he described a tribe of the long-living, milk-nourished Hippias as most just men (Homerus, 1974). This view was repeatedly alluded to by Herodotus even though he

believed in a mythical geographical pattern according to which the level of a people's culture and its remoteness from Greece were reversely proportional (Flory, 1987). Consequently, the further away some people lived from Greece, the more barbaric lifestyle they should lead (Williams, 2012). To confirm this principle, Herodotus gave numerous examples of extremely barbaric peoples, but at the same time he pointed out to the existence of noble savage tribes. A people living in Ethiopia, the farthest land known to the Greeks at that time, is a good case here. Ethiopia is presented as a paradise inhabited by a tribe of ennobled primitives, where gold is found in great abundance, and huge elephants, and ebony, and all sorts of trees; the men living in this country are the tallest in the world, the best looking, and longest-lived (Herodotus, 1965).

The concept of *nobilis barbarus* is best visible in the description of a tribe of the Argippaeans who were presented by Herodotus in marked contrast to the wild and aggressive Scythians. He portrayed them as a people living very simple life, feeding on only fruit and rejecting violence. Neighbouring tribes respected the Argippaeans and did not harm them as they were looked upon as sacred. When they fell out, they also asked them to make up the quarrel and those who fled to them for refuge were safe from all hurt (Herodotus, 1965). In a similar way, Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* depicted a tribe of noble savages which he called the Arimphaeans. They also did not eat meat, lived on forest berries, they had mild manners, and were deemed a sacred race and so they were left unmolested even by the savage tribes among their neighbours (Pliny, 1961).

The concept of *nobilis barbarus* is also present in Roman literature, which made references to the myth of the Golden Age of Mankind and identified it with living in a happy land of Arcadia, which was to become extremely popular in European literature several centuries later. One of the first Roman poets to write about harmonious coexistence of man and nature and introduced the myth of Arcadia to Latin literature was Vergil, who drew upon Theocritus' pastoral poems (Theocritus, 2002; Vergil, 1999). It was Ovid, however, that explicitly combined the myth of the Golden Age with the myth of Arcadia, a place where he set the events of his *Metamorphoses*. He described the lost Golden Age when nature and man coexisted harmoniously. At that time, man had not known law yet, but his undisturbed mind told him how to act. His speech was simple and sincere, his soul pure and his deeds righteous. All felt secure, people did not have high expectations, and nature provided them with everything they needed (Ovid, 1998). In a similar vein, Horace wrote about an idyllic life close to nature. He not only praised such life, but he lived it himself. One of the most beautiful descriptions of a simple, safe and honest life in the countryside, far away from a city life spoilt with greed and lust for power, can be found in the epos

Beatus ille, qui procul negotiis... (Horace, 1994). The concept of *nobilis barbarus* was also alluded to by Tacitus, though in a slightly different context. He praised the noble savagery and rigid manners of Germanic tribes, contrasting them with the inhabitants of declining Rome, who lived in luxury and debauchery (Tacitus, 1999).

***Nobilis barbarus* in the naturalistic approach**

The naturalistic view of the noble savage concept is connected with getting to know the customs of unknown peoples. The development of this concept had been helped by millenarian movements, which at the turn of the millennium awaited the revival of corrupt mankind and return to the primal innocence of the prelapsarian condition, and the restoration of the Golden Age (Goff, 1982). People in Europe were convinced that their world was utterly corrupted, and that an idyllic world inhabited by noble, untainted by sin savages could be found in the Orient (Lie, 2004). This belief was based on, among others, travel accounts which were brought to Europe by Marco Polo. When describing his adventures, Marco Polo often idealized the noble character of Asian peoples contrasting them with depraved Europeans, and in this way reinforced the myth of *nobilis barbarus*. For example, he praised fidelity of spouses when describing the Hindu custom of sati in which a recently widowed woman buried herself on her deceased husband's funeral pyre (Polo, 1976). Similarly, he praised fidelity of married couples in his account of the Mongols' customs (Vogel, 2012).

However, it was geographical discoveries of the 15th and 16th century that played key role in popularising the naturalistic approach to the concept of *nobilis barbarus*. Christopher Columbus' *Diary* and the work of Pedro Mártir de Anghiera, a historian of the Spanish conquest, entitled *De Orbe Novo* (1530) shaped the views of Europeans about the tribes inhabiting the New World that were uncorrupted by civilisation. Descriptions of virgin nature and customs of the newly discovered peoples were in line with the desire to find a terrestrial paradise, a desire Europeans had held for centuries. Many were convinced that the nobility of peoples in America resulted from the fact that they had descended from Adam and Eve before the first humans committed the original sin (Campbell, 1991).

The myth of the noble savage was also popularised thanks to the efforts of Vasco de Quiroga – Bishop of the Diocese of Michoacán and the Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas, both of them working actively for peaceful evangelisation of the Native Americans. Their efforts were supported by the Jesuits who created a social system in South America that can be regarded as the implementation of the Arcadian myth. Inspired by Thomas Moore's *Utopia*, Jesuit Reductions were one of the greatest social experiments in human history which helped to develop

a completely new, orderly and peaceful social structure. Their main aim was to assimilate hundreds of thousands of the native people into Western culture while maintaining their simple and noble lifestyle. Jesuit Reductions were a kind of model of social relations built on Christian values, which was supposed to be a response to the decadence afflicting Europe. They were also a peaceful alternative to slavery imposed on the natives by the Spanish and Portuguese (Cro, 1990).

***Nobilis barbarus* in the Arcadian approach**

The third approach to the concept of the noble savage was especially popular between the 16th and 19th centuries. On the one hand, the popularity of this approach stemmed from the fascination with ancient literature and the emergence of Romantic literature extolling a simple life close to nature. On the other hand, it was a consequence of philosophical debates about human nature. The first works of modern literature which dealt with this subject were *Arcadia* (1504) written by Jacopo Sannazaro and *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (1586) by Philip Sidney. The Arcadian myth became very popular in European culture in the 17th century (Gerbino, 2009), which is evidenced by rich literature, music and painting of that period. William Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and two paintings by Nicolas Poussin entitled *Et in Arcadia Ego* (Green, 1985) deserve a special attention in this respect. The seventeenth-century Polish literature also evoked the myth of Arcadia and happy noble living in harmony with nature. This is well illustrated by Mikołaj Rej's *The Life of the Honest Man* and Jan Kochanowski's *The Midsummer Night's Song*.

The concept of *nobilis barbarus* was revived and popularized in European culture also as a result of philosophical debates on the state of human nature (Pinker, 2003; Flynn, 2008). These debates were inspired by atrocities that Europe had experienced during the wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651), which was published shortly after the Thirty Years' War had ended, concluded that the state of nature was not good. In *De Cive*, he described man as *homo bellicus* – a being fighting a continuous war of all against all (*bellum omnium contra omnes*) (Hobbes, 1999). A completely different view on the state of human nature was presented by the British philosopher Anthony Ashley Cooper, who proclaimed that man was inherently good and the moral sense was innate to him (Cooper, 1977). Similarly, Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed in the noble nature of man. He was of the opinion that human evil was a consequence of the negative influence of civilization. He claimed that *man, however, is naturally good; what then could have depraved him to such a degree, unless the changes that have happened in his constitution, his improvements, and the light he has acquired. Let us*

cry up human society as much as we please, it will not be the less true that it necessarily engages men to hate each other in proportion as their interests clash (Rousseau, 1761).

Currently, there is a debate about who first coined the term *noble savage* in the meaning presented here. The literature often points to J.-J. Rousseau who used the expression *bon sauvage* in 1755. Modern research, however, suggests that the term *noble savage* had earlier been employed by John Dryden in his play *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards*, which had its premier already in 1670 (Ellingson, 2001). Dryden praised the freedoms that living in a state of nature gives to man: *I'm as free, as Nature first made man, 'ere the base Laws of Servitude began, when wild in woods the noble Savage ran* (Dryden, 1995). And then some scholars believe that Dryden borrowed this phrase from a French explorer of North America, Marc Lescarbot, who had written about *bon sauvage* in *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France* (1609) some years before Dryden (Ellingson, 2001; Hames, 2007).

Ignoring those disputes about the origin of the term *noble savage*, it must be stated that the concept was greatly popularised and consolidated by the Romantic literature of the 18th and 19th century. The works of popular American writer James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) are particularly noteworthy in this regard. Cooper was the author of a popular series of adventure novels in which he presented a romantic and idealistic picture of the 18th-century America. His novels express the belief that close contact with unspoiled nature brings out the best qualities in man. Hence, the Indian characters of his novels often embody the concept of *nobilis barbarus*. Similarly, white trappers living far away from civilization in harmony with nature become noble, righteous and happy. Cooper presents them as nature lovers who kill animals only in self-defence or to secure the necessary supplies for a simple life in harmony with nature.

***Nobilis barbarus* in the ecological approach**

The way the concept of the noble savage is viewed today differs from how it was perceived in the past. While all the approaches focus on the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, the first three emphasise nature as the dominant element that allows the development of culture, ensuring the harmonious coexistence of man and nature. The ecological approach, on the other hand, emphasises the dominant importance of culture; nature can develop to the extent that man choosing some kind of a lifestyle permits (Łepko, 2003). Man has to limit his use of natural resources, this being a prerequisite for harmonious coexistence. Today, nature is dependent on the good will of man. The technology of our civilisation makes it possible not only to disturb harmony of na-

ture, but also to disrupt the homeostasis and destroy all beings living on Earth.

A contemporary, ecological approach to the concept of *nobilis barbarus* has its source in the experience of the fragility of nature and the rapid and irretrievable disappearance of the last pristine areas on our planet. Alluding to the earlier approaches to the noble savage concept, Henry David Thoreau initiated a new one, the aim of which was to shape a nature-friendly, simple lifestyle that he described in his book *Walden or Life in the Woods* (1854). In his numerous publications, Thoreau urged the consumer American society to follow the Indian community lifestyle which he held up as a model of the care for nature. He was convinced that the civilized man was able to change his lifestyle, and the Indian style of presence in nature could be very helpful in this respect.

The concept of the ecologically noble savage introduced by Thoreau was greatly popularised by the 19th-century Romantics and Primitivists in their paintings and literary works. Numerous editions of their works reinforced the model of the nature-friendly Indian in the public consciousness. Much in this regard was done by an American diplomat and best-selling writer Ernest Thomson Seton (1860-1946) as well as Charles Alexander Eastman (1858-1939), a writer and social activist born in the Sioux tribe (Krech, 1999).

The Ecological Awakening in the 60s and 70s of the twentieth century contributed to the dynamic development of environmental movements that employed the concept of the ecological Indian present in culture, contrasting it with the Westerner's consumer lifestyle. With the development of mass culture, which popularized this concept, the ecological Indian permanently became part of the social consciousness, becoming a model for shaping ecological relations between man and nature. This is well illustrated by a social campaign organized in the United States as early as 1971 under the slogan *People start pollution. People can stop it* (Krech, 1999).

The stereotype of the Indian living in harmony with nature was perpetuated by film productions, especially Kevin Costner's screen version of Michael Blake's novel *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and a popular screen version of James F. Cooper's novel *Last of the Mohicans* (1992). The Hollywood science fiction production *Avatar* (2009) can be interpreted in a similar vein. Although the film is set on a fictional planet of Pandora, inhabited by a local tribe Na'vi, its message is clear. In contrast to the noble Na'vi who live in perfect harmony with nature, humans are greedy and cruel, their lifestyle being the antithesis of harmonious coexistence with nature. However, among the colonists from Earth there is a group of people who share the Na'vi customs and confirm Thoreau's thesis that the civilized man can learn a lot from *savages* and is able to change his lifestyle to a more nature-friendly one.

Ecological fallacy of the concept of *nobilis barbarous*

In each of the described approaches, accepting the concept of the noble savage is connected with acknowledging that man by his very nature is willing to form harmonious relationships with environment and other people. This view of human nature is obviously attractive as it shows man as good and noble, which may explain the popularity of the concept for over almost three thousand years of our civilization. Much, however, seems to indicate that such a view of human nature is not true. Even before the publication of *Leviathan* (1651) where Thomas Hobbes wrote about the militant nature of man, Michel de Montaigne questioned the innate nobility of savages and gentleness of human nature. In an essay *Of Cannibals* (1580) inspired by cruel customs of the Tupinabá tribe, Montaigne claimed that the natives of South America were neither more noble nor more barbarous than their contemporaries in Europe (Montaigne, 1980). A similar opinion was expressed by Jean de Léry in a book that describes his journey in Brazil *L'Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil*.

One of the first American environmentalists, George Perkins Marsh, when characterizing the relationship between man and nature stated: *The action of man upon the organic world tends to derange its original balances (...), man is everywhere a disturbing agent. (...) Man pursues his victims with reckless destructiveness; and, while the sacrifice of life by the lower animals is limited by the cravings of appetite, he unsparingly persecutes, even to extirpation thousands of organic forms which he cannot consume* (Marsh, 1874).

Nowadays as well, many scholars question the idea of the noble savage and claim that man by nature is not peacefully predisposed to another person or to nature. William Balée is convinced that human nature is destructive and man is more of *homo devastans* than *homo ecologicus* (Balée, 1998). René Dubos shares this opinion about the destructive tendencies of man. In his view, *like the tendency to kill, the tendency to waste and to foul the nest seems to be inscribed in the genetic code of the human species* (Dubos, 2010).

A similar opinion about human nature is expressed by an Austrian biologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt. He asserts that man's destructive presence in the world results from actions aimed at achieving rapid and instant success, actions which are innate to human nature and which he calls *the trap of short-term thinking* (German *Die Falle des Kurzzeitdenkens*). He believes that man has an inborn tendency to ignore far-reaching consequences of his actions (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2000). This worked in the distant past when human population was small, and the technology employed by man was primitive. However, be-

cause of fast pace of human evolution in recent millennia, natural selection has not kept up in developing natural restraints on short-sighted exploitation of nature. Additionally, the widespread use of dynamically-developing technology has brought about a contemporary ecological crisis. Therefore, human nature seen in this way, i.e. with the rooted strategy for immediate success that does not take into account long-term consequences of actions, contradicts the view that man is innately predisposed to harmonious coexistence with nature (Łepko, 2003; Kłeczek, 2013).

Peter Farb, who also believes that the current condition of our planet is largely a consequence of the destructive nature of man, states: *It appears to be a characteristic of the human [evolutionary] line – perhaps the one that accounts for its domination of the earth – that from the very beginning Homo [sapiens] has exploited the environment up to his technological limits to do so. But until recently the harm this exploitation could cause was limited, for ancient man's populations were low and his technology primitive* (Farb, 1970).

Modern discoveries in the field of environmental history provide numerous examples of destructive human activity; man has always destroyed nature, regardless of the times he lived in, his religion or the culture he came from. This is confirmed by many studies carried out in different parts of the world (Stępnik, 2012; Oates, 1999). Because of the scope of this article, only the examples that will help to determine the truth of the concept of the ecological noble savage will be given here. This concept in its modern counterpart *the ecological Indian* functions in common social consciousness, and even constitutes a reference point for developing conservation strategies in many Third World countries. The discussion on this issue has been going on for years (Harkin, Lewis, 2007; Redford, 1999; Register, Le Blanc 2013), but it became especially heated following the publication of two important monographs *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (2000) by S. Krech and *Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005) by J. Diamond. The climax of the discussion was a conference *Re-figuring the Ecological Indian* organized at the University of Wyoming in 2002. During this conference many arguments in favour of and against this concept were presented (Hames, 2007).

In literature, this issue is sometimes presented as *America's Pristine Myth* (Denevan, 1992). Supporters of the ecological Indian concept claim that in pre-Columbian times, America was a virgin continent where man lived in perfect harmony with nature. To prove their point, they evoke descriptions of a state of nature written by European explorers of newly discovered lands. By contrast, opponents argue that the concept of the ecological Indian is a myth that defies the facts. The excellent condition of nature in

America in the mid-18th century that is portrayed in those accounts, was not a consequence of the ecological nature of the Indians, but rather of radically reduced human pressure caused by a drastic decline in the Indian population. Modern research confirms this view. The population of both Americas in the late 15th century was approximately ten times bigger than in the mid-17th century. The decrease in the number of the New World's indigenous inhabitants was mainly due to diseases brought from Europe. It is estimated that in 1492, the Indian population numbered about 53.9 million whereas in 1650 it was 5.6 million (Denevan, 1992).

Archaeological data prove that in the pre-Columbian times Indians significantly changed the Americas' landscape. They reduced the area of virgin forests and changed their composition, increasing the size of grasslands. Farmland, houses, cities and transportation routes were already quite common in the American landscape at that time. All these interferences in nature had a considerable influence on the soil, micro-climate, water management and wildlife populations (Denevan, 1992). The scale of landscape changes is well illustrated by the development of pre-Columbian cities, which in their size and organization could compete with European cities at that time. Many of those American cities had a population of over 50 thousand inhabitants, and Tenochtitlán inhabited by about 250 thousand people was larger than Paris and London. The extensive transportation system of the Inca and Maya empires well deserves an attention here. The Incas built a unified and integrated system of drained roads with the total length of approximately 40 thousand km. A good example of the scale of changes inflicted on the landscape is a system of causeways built on wetlands by the Maya peoples. The longest causeway was more than 100 km long, and on a tropical savannah Llanos de Mojos, the system of causeways used for transportation covered more than 1,600 km (Denevan, 1992).

One of the most dramatic examples of Indian interference in the natural environment is what happened to the Anasazi civilization. The Anasazi had lived in what is now Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Arizona to finally disappear for two centuries before the arrival of Europeans. The Anasazi became extinct due to an ecological disaster which was brought about by their irresponsible attitude to nature (Diamond, 2005; Childs, 2007).

Opponents of the concept of the ecological Indian refer to numerous studies documenting the degradation of nature in the New World, and maintain that the state of environment in the Americas was much better in 1750 than in 1492. In their view, however, this improved condition of nature was the consequence of declining Indian population, rather than their pro-environmental attitude. It appears that the Indians, like Europeans, transformed and destroyed nature proportionally to their numbers and technological

capabilities. Consequently, the concept of the noble ecological savage is more of a modern myth than a reliable scientific theory (Buege, 1996).

Conclusion

The awareness of a deepening ecological crisis forces people to take intensive efforts in order to restore the homeostasis of our planet. However, all environmental initiatives must be based on reliable information about the endangered environment as well as about man who destroys it but is also able to protect it. Mistakes made in this area often lead to counter-productive consequences. It is therefore important to make an accurate assessment of man's natural capabilities in the context of his relationship to nature. Only then will it be possible to develop a strategy for handling the ecological crisis, a strategy that will take into account both the limitations and potential of man and consequently, will enable to effectively prevent the ecological crisis.

Taking this into consideration, it seems crucial to evaluate the concept of *nobilis barbarus* which figures prominently in contemporary culture. After all, it forms the basis for shaping the environmental awareness of young generation and implementing endangered species protection programs in the Third World countries. It seems that man is far more complicated than proponents of this concept suggest. Modern research defies the idealised image of man as an altruistic pacifist who lives in harmony with oneself, other people and nature. This does not mean, however, that we are *homo devastans* and must destroy everyone and everything around. Human nature does not determine the choices that an individual makes. In fact, they are conditioned in many different ways by biological, economic, political, religious, cultural, and even aesthetic factors. Many believe that in the course of man's evolution, human nature has been enriched with altruism and culture, which gives hope for suppressing inborn aggressive tendencies (Dennis, 2009). A realistic approach to human nature that takes into account its destructive tendencies, must allow for human rationality and morality, which counterbalance those tendencies. There is no doubt that the civilized man with the help of technology is easily able to conquer nature. But this will be a Pyrrhic victory that will eventually turn against him for the simple reason that focusing on positive account of profits and losses in the short term, he forgets about long-term consequences of his actions.

A French biologist and environmentalist René Dubos believes that several thousand years of documented human history justify some optimism about the fate of our species. Although human history contains instances of wanton cruelty and destruction of nature, it also provides many examples of altruism and self-sacrifice, qualities well-respected and practised. *One must be blind, ignorant, or prejudiced not*

to recognize that man's genetic structure enables him to be generous and creative as well as aggressive and destructive. The relative importance of bestiality and humanity in human affairs is largely determined by the human choices, decisions, and actions which influence social patterns (Dubos, 2010). The distinction between so-called *big conservation* and *little conservation* introduced by Janis Alcorn underlines that environmental projects in order to be effective must be adapted both to natural conditions of the area and to the culture of the peoples living there (Alcorn, 2005; Boucher, 2011). If we naively assume that the tribes inhabiting tropical forests of Africa and South America are noble ecological savages and on this basis start to implement endangered species protection projects, the effectiveness of such projects is to be seriously doubted (Oates, 1999).

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